

Exerpts from the essay One Foot in the World
Buddhist Approaches to Present-day Problems
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Livelihood and Development 🌐

Right livelihood (*samma ajiva*) is the fifth factor in the Noble Eightfold Path. As a method of earning one's living is important to every human being, whether a member of the clergy or a layman, the correct understanding of right livelihood is crucial. For a monk, complete dedication to the higher life constitutes right livelihood. He then is rightly entitled to be supported by public generosity. In this essay we shall confine ourselves to an inquiry into the concept of right livelihood for the layman.

Right livelihood implies that one has to avoid a wrong means of earning a living, known as *miccha ajiva* in Pali. This includes trades which are directly or indirectly injurious to others, be they animal or human, such as trade in meat, liquor, poison, weapons and slaves. These are contrary to the basic five precepts which all lay Buddhists are expected to abide by. In the world today these trades, except perhaps the slave trade, are flourishing industries, and much of the revenue to governments comes from these industries. This shows to what an extent wrong livelihood is prevalent in the world today.

Even a blameless means of living can become blameworthy if practiced with inordinate greed and dishonesty. If a doctor in private practice makes mints of money exploiting his patients, he is guilty of wrong livelihood even though medicine itself is a noble profession. A vegetable dealer who cheats in weights and measures is similarly guilty of wrong livelihood. Honest scrupulous service rendered without exploiting the public is considered an essential feature of right livelihood.

Buddhism upholds the quality of having few wants (*appicchata*) and the ability to be satisfied with little (*santutthi*) as great virtues. One has to practice these virtues not only in consumerism but in production too; in the modern world, however, these virtues have been totally lost sight of in both these spheres. Therefore governments as well as the private sector aim at ever increasing development. Such development, however, has no limit. Each time a target has been reached, the limit to possible growth recedes further like a mirage. More and more is produced, more and more is consumed. There is no satiation with development, nor with consumerism. This is a limitless race in a limited world with limited resources. Therefore mankind has to learn that the concept of development as it is understood today cannot go on forever, it is logically and practically impossible.

Nature seems to set its own limits to this process of escalated growth. It appears that there are biological, psychological, social and ecological limits to growth. The physical constitution of man seems to revolt against this limitless growth. There is an array of diseases man readily succumbs to today related to overconsumption and overindulgence. There are pressure-related diseases too, which affect both the human body and the human mind. Present-day development taxes man's endurance enormously and he becomes a

psychological wreck due to the pressures of work, competition and maintaining standards. Interpersonal relationships have become superficial, brittle and sour, and this seems to be a sign that society cannot withstand the weight of its material development. In the external world too there are unequivocal signs which portend impending catastrophe unless man changes his course of action. There is air, water and land pollution everywhere, and this is extremely injurious not only to human life but to all forms of life in this planet. These are nature's ways of expressing her disapproval of the methods and rate of production and consumption man has chosen today.

Agriculture is recognized in Buddhism as a noble means of making a living, but what has happened in this sphere? Prompted by population pressures, and encouraged by the ever-expanding vistas of scientific knowledge, traditional methods of tilling the land have given way to mechanized industrial agriculture. Vast acres are plowed by machines; chemical fertilizers are applied freely; weedicides, insecticides and pesticides are used indiscriminately; and large harvests are gathered. More and more research is going on in agricultural engineering to produce better seeds which promise higher yields. Though production has increased, prices remain at a constant high level. In some countries when the price level threatens to go down due to overproduction, the products are methodically destroyed or dumped into the sea despite the fact that large masses of people in the world today are undernourished and some are actually starving to death. It is blatantly clear that the whole industrialized agricultural policy is prompted by inordinate greed and it is far from right livelihood.

From the Buddhist point of view this whole system is wrong. On the one hand it has resulted in the erosion of moral and human values. It has deprived man of sympathy for his fellow sentient beings as is evident from the large-scale use of insecticides. Economic gain seems to be the only criterion by which man is prompted to action. Blinded by short-term economic gain, man seems to turn a blind eye to the long-term repercussions of his aggressive policies on this planet. In the wake of the avaricious and aggressive industrialization, the crime rate has risen to an unprecedented degree, and this is a clear index to man's moral degeneration. On the other hand, the natural ecological balance of the earth has been disturbed to an alarming degree. Chemical pollution of land and water has affected bacteria, insects and fish. While some of these forms of life useful to man have died or are dying, others, especially insects dangerous to man have become resistant to insecticides. As more and more effective chemicals are produced, these creatures become immune to them and the vicious circle goes on without any practical solution in sight. The natural fertility and the organic balance of the soil also diminish as more and more chemical fertilizers are applied throughout the years and thus a vicious circle gets formed there too.

All this evidence clearly shows that man cannot dominate and subjugate nature. In the long run nature emerges triumphant and man becomes the loser. Instead man must learn to co-operate with nature. Here we are reminded of an admonition given by the Buddha that in amassing wealth man must exploit nature as a bee collects pollen. The bee harms neither the beauty of the flower nor its fragrance, similarly man must not pollute or rob

nature of its richness, beauty and its rejuvenating and replenishing capacity. This is the real implication of right livelihood when it comes to the utilization of natural resources.

It should be reiterated that the whole modern concept of development, which seems to have nothing short of the sky itself as the limit, is severely antithetical to Buddhist values. Buddhism sets the limit at the other end: it advocates that we feed our needs and not our greeds. Man needs the basic comforts of food, clothing, shelter and medicine. It is the responsibility of the rulers to provide avenues of employment so that the average man can afford to have these needs satisfied with a fair degree of comfort. As man is naturally prone to greed, Buddhism emphasizes the value of having few wants (*appicchara*). Contentment (*santutthi*) is also a much valued virtue in Buddhism. Care is taken to see that these virtues do not degenerate into apathy and cause social stagnation. Buddhism encourages the layman to be industrious, to forge ahead in his chosen blameless occupation (*utthanasampada*). Wealth earned by sheer perseverance, by the sweat of one's brow, is highly praised as well gotten righteous wealth. It is even recommended that a layman should invest half of his earnings for improvement of his industry. Laymen are also exhorted to save (*arakkhasampada*) their hard earned money, and to lead a comfortable life consonant with earning capacity, avoiding both extremes of miserliness and extravagance/over-indulgence. Thus the tension between having few wants (*appicchata*) and contentment (*santutthi*) on the one hand, and industriousness (*arakkhasampada*) on the other, helps to keep society at a practically comfortable level of development which can be sustained for a long time. When these economic ideas are reinforced with the other moral values inculcated by Buddhism, a stable society with harmonious interpersonal relations can be expected.

The modern concept of large-scale industries and factories also does not agree with the Buddhist concept of right livelihood. These large industries and mechanized labor have made a few people enormously rich and thrown millions of employable people out of employment. Thus wealth gets concentrated among a few factory owners and businessmen while millions can barely eke out an existence. Maldistribution of wealth is regarded in Buddhism as a social evil which paves the way to crime and revolution. Moreover machines have robbed man of his creativity and left him terribly frustrated. This may be one of the reasons why the youth of today have turned to drugs to find an easy escape route.

The concept of right livelihood works with the notion that man is the central concern in economy as producer as well as consumer, not the profit made in the process of products changing hands. The skills and talents of the producer should be enhanced in the process of production and he should have the satisfaction derived from his output. The producer, not an employer above him or a middleman, should get a fair return commensurate with his labor and sufficient to afford him a decent living. The consumer, on the other hand, should get quality and quantity for what he pays. In sharp contrast to this ideology, the profit made by the employer is the central concern today: both the producer and the consumer are subservient to the profit motive. Therefore right livelihood would opt for small-scale industries which would satisfy the creative instinct of man and the basic needs of many more people, and would also ensure a more equitable distribution of

wealth in society. It is better to have a large number of skilled cobblers than a well equipped mechanized shoe factory.

As right livelihood is a part and parcel of the Noble Eightfold Path, when it is rightly practiced it leads to the elimination of greed, hatred and delusion (S. V, 5). Just as the river Ganges is inclined towards the east, he who practices the Noble Eightfold Path is inclined towards Nibbana. Thus the correct understanding of right livelihood is essential for the Buddhist layman who is bent on his spiritual welfare.

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